

When A Nation and A Church Fails II Kings 5

Sunday, July 3, 2022

I am going to suggest to you a way of drawing a new power map in our nation and our churches. In my view, the nation and the church are drifting off course. My question: Can we go from people trusting in secular politics to trusting in Almighty God? It has never been easy for secular people, pagan people, to trust in God.

Now to the Bible business at hand. In II Kings 5, a powerful politician has contracted leprosy. His name is Naaman. He does not believe in God. "But he had leprosy." Where does he go for help? He goes to the king.

Political people expect political solutions. But sometimes kings and presidents fail. Someone said of President Coolidge that he "aspired to be the least President the country had ever had; he attained his desire." Presidents fail and sometimes they get blamed for failures they didn't create and can't prevent. They fail miserably because there are problems they can't solve. When a politician faces an inscrutable problem, he blames the other party. The blame game has always worked short-term, but it never solves any serious problems.

Naaman's king could do nothing about the leprosy but was happy to send a letter of recommendation to the king of Israel and a huge sum of money. Stereotypical liberal king: Throw money at it. Now, a slave girl from Israel had explicitly told Naaman that there was a prophet in the land that could cure him. But Naaman went to see the king. "When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.'" The king was powerless.

One big truth that stands out in the story: Nations Fail.

Kings can't heal. Kings can't control the economy. The books in the Old Testament are called I and II Kings. Irony here: Kings are irrelevant. They would better be called I and II Prophets. Prophets speak truth and put political power in its place. Kings can do nothing about famine. Plague. Recession. Depression. Let me tell you that if we have another great depression, we are not morally or spiritually prepared. Our pontificating, slogan-slinging, conspiracy-theory laden Congress will not know what to do. Listen to me. I believe we survived the Great Depression with values of prudence, cooperation, sharing, sacrifice, and empathy. People cared for one

another. These values are now in short supply. Now we are angry, pushy, demanding, mean.

Naaman finally went to see the prophet. After his staff calmed him down, they convinced Naaman to follow the prophet's instructions: "Go wash in the Jordan seven times. The Scripture tells the story: "So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean."

There it is. When nations fail, there's nothing left to us but the word from God: "Go wash in the Jordan seven times."

Churches Fail

The problem we face is that at the very time when our government is failing us, when Congress refuses to "congress," so to speak, we also have a failing church.

Confusion tortures the churches. We are confused about the meaning of basic words: Christian, American, patriot, liberal, conservative. People now listen to sermons, not with Christian ears, but with liberal or conservative ears. I preached a sermon once on the Good Samaritan. I never mentioned the Affordable Health Care Act. I didn't talk about health insurance. I never left the story. After church, a red-faced deacon walked by and spouted at me, "You socialist." Let the good times roll. Others have blended Christian with American and decided that patriotism is a Christian virtue. Confused people need priorities. Here are my descriptive words in the order of their importance:

I am a Christian first.

I am an American second.

I am a post-liberal third.

If you are confused at any time, make like Martin Luther and say, "I am baptized."

We are confused about our loyalties. Let me show you something that Naaman says after he was healed: "May the Lord pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant on

this one count.' He said to him, 'Go in peace.'" Do we get it? Naaman has received the greatest gift – healing and life, but he still must worship local gods. Say hello America! We take the gifts of the church – salvation, baptism, forgiveness. We baptize our babies and bury our dead, but we must worship local gods. We have mixed loyalties. On this Fourth of July weekend, Americans should be packing the churches in sackcloth and ashes and praying for God to heal our land and reconcile our divisions, but we are out worshipping local gods.

I have been watching worship services of some of the large, nondenominational churches that are attracting mainline church members. They have a different liturgy: Forty minutes of praise music. Forty minutes of political ranting. Forty minutes of preaching. The pastors tell us that the 40- minute political rant has become central to the Sunday worship. These pastors believe that liberal Christians have led American astray. Interviews with people who have left their churches to attend one of these mega-churches indicate that they have come for the politics. I see Jesus, a fierce looked smeared across his face, a whip in his hand, and I hear him shouting, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of politics.'"

Now, evangelicals are fleeing their churches and most of them are moving to ones further on the right. There have been two migrations in the American churches. The first migration has been the number of conservatives who left liberal or moderate churches over social issues. Mega-churches are filled with church-going people who once went to churches like ours, or FUMC, or First Reformed. The churches are not growing; they are exchanging members. The second migration, much more recent, is the migration of conservative evangelicals to more right-wing, partisan congregations. The Southern Baptists are bleeding members because of its ferocious infighting over race relations, women in ministry, sexual misconduct allegations, and the inerrancy of the Bible. The UMC, America's second-largest denomination, is coming apart at the seams as it moves toward a split over gay marriage and other social issues. Evangelicals say that gay rights are wrong; liberals say gay rights are right.

We are confused. A lesbian couple attended FBC Dayton while I was pastor. One day they told me that they were leaving for a Southern Baptist Church because I didn't believe in the inerrant Bible. They were going back to the church that despised them, hated them. They were going back to a church where they had to hide their relationship. I was stunned. Confusing.

A choir member came up to me after church one Sunday and said to me, "I'm leaving and going to the Unitarian Church. You talk about Jesus too much." Win some. Lose some.

When Christians argue they use extreme examples. If they are on the right side, they drag up the most far-left radical they can find and they imply that all liberals are like that crazy person. Yesterday I saw a segment on Fox News that insisted that all liberals are anti-patriotic because some are saying they will not celebrate the 4th of July this year. Most Americans are not anti-patriotic. I love the 4th of July. Baseball in full swing. Bar-b-que. Beer. The flag. The parades. I don't celebrate it in church, but tomorrow I'm Yankee Doodle Dandy without the macaroni unless it is mac and cheese with ribs. If they are on the left side, they do the same thing. When the Patriot Front group, a white supremacist group, marched in Boston last week, the liberals rushed to paint all conservatives as white supremacists. We act as if the whole nation is now filled with nothing but extremists.

As a patriotic American, who loves my country, I don't want us to fail. As a pastor in a Christian congregation, I don't want our churches to fail. We can't survive a failing nation and a failing church. Somebody, and I mean us, must step up now. I want to share a story from *The Brothers K* that I shared earlier, but it has gripped my heart and I believe it worth repeating.

The story is about God and baseball and a family named Chance. Hugh and Laura Chance have a marriage filled with conflict. Yet the skills required to play baseball (Hugh's game) and worship God (Laura's passion) finally manage to save one of their children, Irwin, from being "erased" by the U. S. military. Irwin, drafted into the army, went to Vietnam. One day his commanding officer ordered Irwin to kill a Vietnamese boy. Irwin, reverted from being a U. S. soldier to a Christian soldier. He refused to kill and instead he attacked his commanding officer with a tube of Gleam toothpaste. He was locked in the brig where he kept singing and praying. The Army psychiatrist diagnosed Irwin as psychotic and ordered him treated with electric shock treatments and drugs. Hugh, Irwin's daddy left in the middle of baseball season and tried to convince the army that Irwin was trying to hold on to the only thing that could give him sanity in an insane world – singing gospel songs and praying. Nothing worked. Everett was about to be locked away for life.

His brother, Everett, a draft dodger, who had fled to Canada, came back to Washington to speak for his brother. Everett had also become an atheist. He burst into the Sunday worship of the Seventh Day Adventist Church his family attended. Everett stood up in the pulpit and this is what he said:

The reason my heart, all our hearts are hurting so bad is that the numbskulled member of our family, the one who managed to love all of us, is in terrible trouble. I came here to this house because this is where Irwin learned "Thou shalt not kill." He still loves this place and the God of this house. I tell you my brother is holding himself together singing little Sabbath School ditties, and saying Memory Verses and prayers right through all that electric shock treatment. IF somebody in this house doesn't hear our family's cry, if somebody is not moved to do something for Irwin's sake, his mind, his love for you, his belief in this house, are going to be destroyed. It's that simple and it puts the ball in your court.

Well, enough of those Seventh Day Adventists were moved enough went to join in a caravan to rescue Irwin. They were aided by the national leaders of the Seventh Day Adventist Church and a group of medical doctors from the university medical school.

I believe that our nation and our churches are now in the same place Irwin was and we are going to lose both if we keep depending on politics. I believe that unless we do something to change the toxic atmosphere, the sheer meanness, the hatred, we are going to lose everything. And trust me, Putin and every sorry dictator on this planet is hoping that we will fail and fall. They would love to rid the world of democracy and Christianity. So if you are fueling anti-democracy ideas, if you are participating in the undoing of the church, I beg you to come home to the Church and to America – the United States of America. That would be one great Fourth of July celebration. More than that, it would mean a revival because America once again would heed the prophet's word, "Go wash seven times in the Jordan River."